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Improving Democracy Assistance: Building Knowledge through Evaluations and Research

Jack Goldstone, Committee Chair

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Background

- USAID has invested substantial resources to support development of democracy & good governance (DG) worldwide
- Despite significant investments, understanding of the actual impacts of USAID DG assistance on progress toward democracy remains limited
- USAID's creation of SORA in 2000 was an effort to determine the impact of democracy assistance

To better determine the impact of DG Programs, we looked at:

1. Improvements in measurement (indicators of democracy)
2. Learning from past DG programs (case studies)
3. Learning from current and future DG programs (impact evaluations)

What we learned:

Better indicators of democracy will NOT provide a 'magic bullet' to track progress: too many disputes over what "democracy" is.

Case studies cannot determine the impact of past DG programs if the right data for studying that impact was not collected

Getting the right data on current and future DG programs is the most promising way to determine how DG programs affect democracy

To explore what is possible, we:

Visited USAID in Albania, Peru and Uganda

- Met with USAID officers, contractors, and local partners to understand conditions on the ground
 - Explored opportunities, obstacles and objections to improving evaluations – in particular impact evaluations and experiments
- While the concerns regarding more rigorous evaluations are valid, and serious obstacles exist, field teams concluded that **many of the proposals for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation are in principle feasible in the field**

We believe:

“The goal of USAID should not be merely improvement of its project evaluations, or funding additional case studies, but building the entire capacity of USAID to generate, absorb, and disseminate knowledge regarding democracy assistance and its effects.”

What Should USAID Do?

Four-part strategy to increase knowledge to support DG policy and planning (Blueprint for USAID research):

1. Pilot program of impact evaluations
2. Focus on Indicators at sectoral level
3. Case studies of trajectories, not programs
4. Rebuilding learning capacity in USAID

1. Increased use of impact evaluations

- Establish an **Evaluation Initiative** with pilot impact evaluations to examine feasibility for selected DG projects
- Include at least some randomized designs
- For all projects in the **EI**, get baseline data and data on comparison/control groups

2. Sectoral-level Indicators

- Invest more in indicators of democratic function at the “meso” level, less in accounting/outputs
- Apply USAID’s existing collection of policy-relevant outcome indicators now
- If you wish standard “Democracy” indicators, it will need funding for further research.

3. Case Studies

- Case studies should seek to examine the full range of factors that promote or hinder democratization in various countries, not just specific programs
- USAID could draw on ongoing academic research, OR support case study research for its own purposes
- If USAID commissions case studies, it should use a competitive proposal-solicitation process to get the best theoretically specified & clustered set of case studies (logic of comparison)
- Results of case studies need to be discussed, criticized, and reflected on by DG officers, not just filed away.

4. Rebuild Learning Capacity within USAID

- Rebuild organizational learning capacity—frequent interaction of DG officers to share ‘what works;’ place value on learning for advancement within USAID
- Develop effective learning mechanisms, including regular means of disseminating and discussing results of evaluations and other research

The DG Evaluation Initiative:

- Develop and oversee a pilot trial of impact evaluations
- Provide technical expertise to Missions
- Work with contractors on proposals and execution of impact evaluations
- Consider creating a social science advisory group
- Rebuild institutional learning capacity

The Payoff

Learning which DG programs work best, in which places, at what cost, to produce specific results.